Looping through Western Oklahoma

By Emily Neidigh

The 2,000-mile Great Plains Trail of Oklahoma became a reality for western Oklahoma and four National Wildlife Refuges - Washita, Optima, Wichita Mountains and Salt Plains. Fashioned by the same company that helped create the Texas Birding Trails, the Great Plains Trail of Oklahoma picks up where the Texas trails left off, traveling through such little-known communities as Hardesty, Freedom, Cleo Springs and Roosevelt, with hopes of linking to a future trail in Kansas.

The trail's grand opening was held April 29, during the Annual Birding and Crystal Festival at Salt Plains Refuge.

The development of the trail has been a grassroots effort of local citizens, landowners, non-profit organizations, conservation groups, government agencies, businesses and communities in western Oklahoma. The idea originated five years ago during a meeting of the High Plains Resource Conservation & Development, a non-profit organization funded by the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service.

"We were talking about the wildlife birding trails in Texas, and we just started brainstorming about how we could do something similar in Oklahoma," explained Kenny Knowles, chairman of the Oklahoma Wildlife & Prairie Heritage Alliance (OWPHA) "It had meager beginnings, but one thing led to another and now we have the designated trails along with the map." The OWPHA works to increase landowner awareness of funding, education and assistance programs, in the arena of wildlife conservation.

Federal funds were used for the master plan – with additional funding from state grants and contributing partnerships and agencies. There were countless "in kind" contributions. Each loop was responsible for funding its own directional signage.

Treasures in Western Oklahoma

The Great Plains Trail consists of 13 driving loops that span the entire western portion of the state. Each loop guides

Mushing for Fun and Relaxation

19 Days to Complete Serum Run

By Alan Peck

My wife, Barbara, and I sat next to our lead dogs on the sea ice in front of Nome, Alaska. My face was raw and chapped from weeks of exposure to wind and cold. My muscles were a little sore and I longed for sleep. I took off my heavily lined mitts and rubbed the deep splits that had developed on my fingers, the result of cold air that had sucked my skin dry.

It had been days since my last shower and a faint bad odor was present even though I was wearing layers of clothes under my parka. Like me, Barbara was feeling worn and tired.

Right then, we turned to look at each other and our smiles developed into laughter.

Barbara, our team of 12 dogs, and I were expedition members of the Serum Run. Our three-week journey ended moments ago when the expedition dog teams and supporting snowmobiles followed the trail into Nome. Soon enough we would all be on a plane, back to that part of Alaska where cities and towns are connected by roads.

Our dogs, still hitched to the sled, rolled in the snow or barked to go; a few patiently waited. These muscled athletes had just run 800 miles and their attitude showed me they were ready to continue.

This annual dog team journey with snowmobile support travels across Alaska's frozen rivers, tundra, and sea ice from Nenana to Nome. This year, 12l mushers and 14 snowmobile partners, along with more than 140 sled dogs, traveled 19 days to complete the route.

Dog teams carry enough supplies to be independent for a day or two while each snowmobile hauls up to 700 pounds of equipment and food in a cargo sled. We travel 30 to 70 miles each day on snow packed trails or through challenging

The Great Plains Trail of Western Oklahoma includes 13 driving loops through Western Oklahoma, crossing four national wildlife refuges and offering novel attractions like this shoe pole. In the 1990s, two farm boys who went to college decided never to farm again. They nailed their work boots to a pole and over time, other people have added their work boots. Western cowboy boots were added once, but they were removed: the pole is for farming boots only. (LouAnn Speulda/USFWS)

travelers through areas with the best opportunities to view wildlife, along with designated stopping points, including both public and private sites. The trails also showcase the state's rich Indian heritage and early settlements of the West, as well as chances to explore off-the-beaten-path travel routes and discover some of the most scenic roads. The map describes guest ranches and farms along the way as well as state parks, birding routes and, of course, national wildlife refuges.

"We're hoping to increase tourism in the area," said Knowles. "Any increase will be a boon to our communities – and so many people don't realize all the treasures we have in western Oklahoma."

The trail map is a collaborative effort of the Oklahoma Wildlife & Prairie Heritage Alliance the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation, Playa Lakes Joint Venture, Oklahoma Economic Development Authority, High Plains Resource Conservation & Development, Great Plains RC&D and the Oklahoma Tourism and Recreation Department.

Blazing the Trail

Fermata, a consulting company that assists communities in developing nature tourism, helped organize the stopping points for the trail. Landowners had to nominate their own stopping point, but knowledgeable refuge staff often recommended places with good wildlife observation.

Refuge staff worked on initial planning for the trail as well as outreach and such assessment tasks as verifying the presence of particular species or habitats. They also checked out parking areas, roads, restrooms, signs, other facilities to make sure that people could see at least some of the habitat or wildlife they expected.

Refuge staff found the work an "eye-opening experience," getting an appreciation for the landowner's perspective, as well as trying to figure out what *really* would draw people into the outdoors. Some of the more involved staff included David Maple from Washita Refuge/Optima Refuge, Betsy Rosenbaum from Wichita Mountains Refuge and Jon Brock from Salt Plains Refuge.

The OWPHA and trail volunteers worked with state legislators to address liability laws so that private landowners would be able to participate without fear of litigation.

The Great Plains Trial will be promoted by the Oklahoma Travel Department on television and in print, with maps available at state visitor centers, refuges and online at http://www.wildlifedepartment.com/wildlifetrails.htm.

"It has been very positive to work with landowners in this way. Everyone came together, understanding the value of wildlife and wildlife viewing for the benefit of conservation and the communities that surround national wildlife refuges," says Keitha Dale, a member of the Salt Plains Friends. ◆

Emily Neidigh is outdoor recreation planner at Salt Plains National Wildlife Refuge

wilderness terrain. The expedition commemorates the 20 men and their dog teams who, in 1925, relayed diphtheria serum across Alaska's frozen tundra to save countless lives in Nome. Today, the Serum Run promotes a different health issue each year; this year participants discussed snowmobile injury prevention in schools and community meetings along the trail.

Vast White Landscape

After a ceremonial send off in Nenana on February 19, we were off and running. Four days later, we crossed the most remote and lightly traveled section, 125 miles on the frozen Yukon River between the villages of Tanana and Ruby. The half-mile-wide river is surrounded by a vast white landscape of boreal forest, wetlands and low hills, forming the northern

continued pg 25

Refuge System hydrologist Alan Peck, his wife and their team of 12 dogs participated in an annual dog team journey across Alaska's frozen rivers, tundra, and sea ice from Nenana to Nome. This year, 12l mushers and 14 snowmobile partners, along with more than 140 sled dogs, traveled 19 days to complete the route. (Alan Peck/USFWS)

Biologists hold a bull caribou secure between two boats, while a Selawik student finishes attaching a radio collar to the animal. Selawik students helped biologists attach collars to about 20 caribou in September 2005. (Susan Georgette/USFWS)

and worked with the students to interpret these data. Over the coming months, additional location data will be e-mailed to the Selawik school. High school science and math teachers will then help students plot the data, improving map reading and computer skills as well as improving students' understanding of migration and caribou ecology.

The Selawik students hope to mount a wall-sized map in the school where push pins will mark how far the caribou travel – often 300 miles or more from their summer range to winter range. People in Selawik generally see the Western Arctic herd pass by twice a year, but may have little idea where the animals go the rest of the time.

The refuge is also providing financial support to adapt a Project Caribou curriculum from Canada. Other educational activities using the tracking data and caribou in general will be conducted in the classroom as well. ◆

Mushing – *from pg 9*

boundary of the 2.1-million-acre Nowitna National Wildlife Refuge.

It took three days to complete this trail section. Half way across, we encountered the first of many snowstorms. Heavy snowfall buried a trail marked by previous travelers. White out conditions and winds gusting to 40 mph made traveling hazardous. The snowmobiles set out to establish a new trail, but the severe conditions made it slow and difficult for them to avoid the traps hidden beneath the snow. People used shovels, tow ropes and wenches to extract snowmobiles and heavy cargo sleds as darkness complicated the situation. These are conditions where dog teams travel at a faster speed than the snowmobiles.

A day after the storm, our expedition arrived in Galena, a bush community of about 600 people on the Yukon River. I visited the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service office that manages the Nowitna, Koyukuk and the northern part of Innoko national wildlife refuges. I talked with Karin Lehmkuhl, who, for the past two years, has helped coordinate local logistics for the Serum Run.

Standing on the runners of a dog sled as the miles go by gave me time to observe and contemplate. Traveling through Alaska's immensity, I reconnect with the fundamentals of why I work for the Service: to protect and preserve the natural habitats that are biologically unique and culturally rich – and to rejuvenate my soul. ◆

Alan Peck is a hydrologist with the Refuge System's Water Resources Branch in Anchorage. He began mushing in 1986. Since then, he and his wife, Barbara Trost, have raised their own dogs for long distance ski-jors (harnessed dogs connected to a skier with a pulk) and mushing trips. Alan was on the Serum Run in 2005 and 2006.

Barbara Trost mushed across Alaska with a team of dogs and her husband Alan Peck, a hydrologist with the Refuge System's Water Resources Branch in Anchorage. (Alan Peck)